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Read at the annual convention of
the National Retail Dry Goods Asso-
ciation, January 18, 1935. MAR 12 1935 ★
U. S. Department of Agriculture

WHAT THE CONSUMER HAS A RIGHT TO EXPECT IN
THE SERVICEABILITY OF DRESS FABRICS

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Believe it or not--and what many merchants say, notwithstanding--
women do not expect impossible values. They have long since learned that
things of this earth are earthy. They know they will not get heavenly per-
fection until they reach a celestial department store and are outfitted with
their halos and harps.

They more often take the viewpoint of Rastus who asked his friend:
"What kind of a woman did you-all get, Mose?" To which Mose replied: "She's
an angel, that's what she is," "Boy, you sho am lucky," muttered Rastus
sorrowfully, "mine's still alive."

However, we will perhaps all agree that even here below, the con-
sumer always has a right to expect her money's worth. And what is her money's
worth in serviceability of dress fabrics?

I am inclined to look at it this way. Every time a fabric is pur-
chased, the consumer has a particular need which she is trying to satisfy.
This need dictates the qualities she is looking for and should get. Whether
or not she obtains these qualities should depend upon the price she can pay
and whether that price is sufficient to give a socially just return to all
those who participated in producing those goods.

There are, of course, certain minimum qualities which she has a
right to expect in all garment fabrics. For example, by the very nature of
things, garments must be cleaned. A consumer therefore has a right to expect

that when cleaned by suitable methods, every garment fabric will present an acceptable appearance. Either it should not shrink so that the garment is uncomfortable or unsightly, or she should be informed, at the time of purchase, how much it will shrink so that she can make the proper size allowance.

With our modern knowledge of dyestuffs and dyeing methods, is it too much to ask that all dyed fabrics retain an acceptable color as long as the fabric lasts? Is it too much to ask that all fabrics be reasonably durable? You notice I say "reasonably" because of course I am thinking of all kinds-- from evening gowns to house dresses. Gauzes of misty moonbeams are perhaps durable enough for draping the angels in heaven. But you'll remember that even the working angels in that famous play, "Green Pastures," draped their wings with good, stout gingham aprons. After all, serviceability and suitability go hand in hand.

However, over and above minimum qualities, every consumer should have a fair chance to make an intelligent decision as to which fabric suits the need she is seeking to satisfy when she makes her purchase. She does not expect the same serviceability from all fabrics. Often she does not want it. When she is buying a glamorous evening dress nowadays she is not looking for a fabric that will wear a lifetime. But when she is buying her winter coat, she has a right to expect a fabric that will hold its own for 3, or 4, or maybe 5 seasons. She has a right to know what qualities of serviceability she is buying. And she has a right to the information which will make it possible for her to compare these qualities intelligently in fabrics of different prices.

In my opinion, it is the job of the retailer to see that she has this chance to buy intelligently. And unfortunately it is in this respect

that our present retail merchandising methods are failing. With the bewildering array of fabrics now on the market, even the most intelligent and earnest purchaser is unable to judge serviceability. Many fabrics today are so constructed and finished that our good old tests no longer hold. Time was when we judged our fabrics by feel and taste and smell. But what does it profit a man nowadays to chew a synthetic fiber or smell a tweed? Each season brings onto the market new fabrics; how they will hold up in use nobody knows. Is it any wonder we have a tremendous volume of returned goods? Consumer resentment at this condition of affairs is piling up and is undoubtedly the motivating power in the consumer movements now developing so rapidly in this country.

Glen Buck in his recent book, "What's the Matter with Advertising?" says: "It is a safe wager that American intelligence averages high" and "No where under the sun and stars is there a more intelligent people than ours." I agree with Mr. Buck. I believe the consumer wants and is intelligent enough to comprehend facts concerning serviceability and every other pertinent quality of the merchandise she is offered on the retail counter. And certainly no honest, reasonable human being denies that a buyer has a right to know what he is getting for his money. No one wants to buy blindly. No one wants to buy by guess. But this is the position into which the buying public has been forced by our present merchandising methods.

Why do we not give customers definite facts concerning the serviceability of fabrics? Well, the chief reason is one which, of course, we do not care to mention in public. But here in the family can we not acknowledge the cold, unvarnished truth; namely, that retail stores do not have these facts themselves about their merchandise? It is perhaps a shame to disturb those

halos which have so long rested jauntily on the heads of store buyers but I ask you candidly. If a store has no testing laboratory service available to its buyers, is it not true that its own buyers are purchasing largely by guess? Just as in the case of the customer, the much extolled "experience" is found wanting these days when most fabric qualities can only be determined by laboratory test or actual wear.

And when the store buyer does have some definite information, what real chance is there of it trickling all the way down the line and finally getting from the clerk to the customer? Is it not likely to be a bit garbled on the way? There was the clerk in the silk department of one of Washington's largest department stores who, when I asked her if a certain piece of silk was pure dye, answered blithely: "Oh yes, the dye is pure." I heard of another recently who when asked if a fabric was weighted, said with girlish enthusiasm, "Oh yes, it is very nicely weighted."

Now it happens that some 20 million of our population have, during the past 50 years or so, fallen into the disturbing habit of going to school. Hundreds of thousands of our women have attended colleges; many are and have been enrolled in home economics classes where they are taught what kind of facts they should be able to get about merchandise, and what facts they need to know about merchandise before they can select intelligently. Many thousands more are attending study groups conducted by women's clubs and the rural extension service. These women often know far more about the meaning of terms used in textile manufacture than do the clerks. They are disgusted when their questions are answered ignorantly or dismissed with vague sales talk.

Is there any way of giving facts concerning serviceability to customers? From the great increase in the number of tags and labels now put on

fabrics and garments, these are apparently being accepted by merchants and manufacturers as good carriers of information. I agree. I believe tags giving facts about quality should be as firmly attached to the merchandise as the price tag. But I also believe these facts should be given in as straight-forward, definite fashion as the price is given. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case.

For example, some tags carry the words "washable" and "guaranteed to wash." What do they mean? A clerk in a department store in my home town naively remarked when a fabric labeled "washable" was returned with a complaint that it faded, "Oh, 'washable?'" That just means you can wash the material. It doesn't mean the colors won't run or the fabric won't shrink."

What is the meaning of such terms as "pre-shrunk," "super-shrunk," and "natural shrunk?" From the performance of fabrics bearing these labels, there seems to be no great united front in the industry on this point. Why can we not have definitions for such terms and then inform the customer sincerely and honestly what they mean?

There is a lot of loose talk right now about the need of "consumer education." I personally believe that there is just as much need for "merchant education." Let's take the silk situation for example. When the words "pure dye" first appeared on fabrics on the retail market, educational agencies were quick to cooperate by teaching consumers the meaning of these words as originally defined in the trade. Then the quibbling began, and it took years to get the industry to agree upon a definition of "pure dye." Just as soon as that was settled and there seemed some hope of bringing order out of chaos, a whole new flock of labels appeared saying "pure silk." This is apparently another term of ambiguous meaning. If a consumer keeps her faith in her

mother tongue, "pure" means "pure." But according to the results of many tests made on garments so labeled--and more surprising still, according to the alibis of some merchants--"pure" ceases to mean "puré" when the word is associated with silk.

All such little games do not get us any place. Everybody, even consumers, appreciate old-fashioned honesty. Subterfuges create ill will, not good will. Is it any wonder that the silk industry is not basking in consumer favor at present?

Now a fair question is what kind of a label do I think is a definite, complete one? Well, I saw one the other day dealing with color fastness. It read as follows: "XYZ wash fabrics are fast to soap and boiling, fast to sun and weather, fast to perspiration and uric acid, fast to everything they encounter as wash fabrics. We unreservedly guarantee that the original color of XYZ will last as long as the garment itself. If this garment should not absolutely live up to this guarantee, we will promptly and cheerfully return your money." That, to my mind, is a real label.

But I believe in many instances there are far simpler ways of giving definite facts to consumers regarding serviceability. I believe that grading systems would be even more helpful. Of course these would have to be carefully worked out with proper standards established for each grade and a sensible, easily remembered series of names adopted designating the various grades.

I know that we have been hearing for years that textiles are so complicated their qualities cannot possibly be graded. Fortunately at least one department store has tackled the impossible. Its testing laboratory has set up grading systems for the warmth and the durability of household blankets and each blanket shown in the store is labeled in accordance with these

grading systems. The head of that department says they have had less returns since this practice was adopted and that there are many other evidences of consumer appreciation of this help in selection. No doubt a little investigation would show that other types of grading systems could be used to designate to consumers different serviceability qualities of other fabrics.

In the case of some materials, it might be more helpful to write consumer specifications which would describe either the construction of the various qualities of fabric in a given class, or the performance they will give in use.

Of course it will take time and study to work out these or any other valuable consumer guides. I am informed that just recently, one department store has attacked the problem by establishing a research fellowship in one of our large research institutions. Efforts will be concentrated on the development of specifications for textile materials. Money would be well spent in many such projects.

The consumer group in this country is fast becoming articulate. The right of the consumer to know what she is buying in serviceability of fabrics and of all merchandise is recognized now as never before. The most practical way of giving this information is one of the pressing merchandising questions today.

